

**Volunteer Perspectives on Management Approach and Response Efforts
With Hawaiian Monk Seals on Kauai**

**Tim Robinson, Volunteer and Projects Coordinator
Kaua'i Monk Seal Watch Program**

*E ho'olaulima makou I malama 'ilio o ke kai
We must cooperate to take care of our monk seals*

1. Introduction

Kaua'i Monk Seal Watch Program (KMSWP) is an entirely volunteer organization, and is funded only by donation. One hundred per cent of each contribution goes directly into our projects and activities, as all time, effort, and meeting space is freely given. At present, an umbrella group, Hawai'i Wildlife Fund, a 501c/3 organization, handles our funds.

Our mission is to sustain and enhance Hawaiian Monk Seals and their habitat by providing innovative management and monitoring, encouraging community participation, promoting environmental education and cultural awareness.

2. KMSWP Roles and Objectives

- (a) To establish a rapid response government-volunteer network to ensure that Hawaiian Monk Seals using Kaua'i's shorelines may do so without disturbance.

This is a continuously evolving objective. Obviously, our participation in the Marine Mammal Commission workshop will help shape and refine this for the future.

- (b) Provide environmental education, understanding, and appreciation of Hawaiian Monk Seal Biology and ecology.

KMSWP has programs in place for both Kaua'i's visitor industry and our local schools. While the school effort focuses on an overall education about HMS, the tourism effort concentrates on an awareness of the seals' situation for the short-term visitor. Both stress the importance of human behavior in seal survival.

- (c) Promote proper human behavior around seals.

Mostly, we talk to visitors, local residents, and school children. Whenever, wherever we are asked, we pass along our knowledge about HMS and answer all questions, emphasizing proper guidelines for viewing.

- (d) Document and identify the total number of seals on Kaua'i.

We identify hauled-out seals by tags, markings, and scars, and pass that information on to our coordinator. Experts then determine numbers from air sightings, beach counts, and specifically identified seals.

- (e) Monitor the movement, migration, and behavior of seals daily.

We pass any information we have about seals on our beaches (identity, behavior, location, etc.) to our group coordinator.

- (f) Document marine debris-seal interactions or entanglement and take appropriate action.

When we are notified of a seal caught in debris, we contact appropriate governmental authorities and get to the area immediately to determine what can be done.

- (g) Document and monitor injuries to seals on Kaua'i.

We follow up on any reports of injuries to seals. If wounds appear to be healing and the animal is not distressed, we record the information. In urgent situations, we contact help immediately.

- (h) Work with NMFS and DLNR to protect and monitor all HMS pups born on Kaua'i.

KMSWP is actively involved in all birth events on the island. While fully integrated into monitoring, establishing perimeters, handling crowds, and translocation efforts in 2000, roles changed somewhat in 2001 - see Sec 4.

3. KMSWP Projects

- (a) Education - Local Schools

KMSWP volunteers began visiting public school classrooms island-wide in 2001 and added private schools in 2002. We provide the program to all fourth-grade classrooms annually. Our goal is to raise student awareness and concern for the HMS. The cornerstone of the effort is recognition of proper human behavior in the presence of seals. Presentations include photos/slides, sharing of knowledge and experiences, and Q&A interaction. The program is growing - in 2002, we reached more than 90 percent of the island's fourth-graders. After 10 years, we will have shared the presentation with an entire future generation of Kauians.

- (b) Visitor Information

Since the daily interaction of people with such a critically endangered marine mammal is unique to Kaua'i, viewing guidelines for visitors are essential. We have a reader-friendly viewing

guideline sheet available that is designed for the visitor industry. It is currently in more than 1,400 rooms on the island, and we hope eventually to be in 100 percent of visitor units. In addition, four major tourist publications print the guidelines---one with every issue, and three with considerable frequency as space permits.

(c) Website

KMSWP has a comprehensive website - www.kauaimonkseal.com - which covers everything about the seals, the organization, visitor industry participation, valuable links, and viewing guidelines, as well as a full gallery of excellent photos. Soon viewers can link to a company called Nite-Owl T-shirts to purchase our logo t-shirts. Nite-Owl is generously donating all profits from the shirts to KMSWP.

(d) Birth Event Protocols

In May 2000, KMSWP joined local, state, and federal agencies in efforts to begin developing new protocols for public beach births on Kaua'i. We are contributing ideas, based on our experiences, to improve future response.

(e) Signage

KMSWP is currently providing ideas for new signage in perimeter areas around hauled-out HMS.

4. Public Beach Birth Events

(a) Management - Past

In 2000, Kaua'i experienced an HMS birth on its most highly used public beach, within Po'ipu Beach Park. Mother and pup were successfully protected through weaning, abandonment, and the pup's translocation. For the Po'ipu event, a NMFS biologist was in charge throughout, effectively integrating volunteers in all phases of the 45-day experience. KMSWP members generally covered the watch from early morning to late evening, and Brad Ryon (NMFS) was on site overnight. He was also there parts of many days and available whenever needed. Decisions regarding the site were, for the most part, made with local interest in mind, and most people involved were kept fully informed. Volunteers gained valuable experience in monitoring, perimeter placement, visitor management, and translocation assistance.

A second pup, born three weeks after the first, at Maha'ulepu, was also nursed, weaned, left by the mother, and successfully translocated. This site has about 10-20 percent of the beachgoers as Po'ipu Beach Park does, and closes at sundown due to private access restrictions. The site was managed almost entirely by KMSWP volunteers, with professionals performing the translocation. Community and media support were overwhelming for both events and complaints were few.

In 2001, the same (Po'ipu) mother seal pupped again in the beach park. While the overall operation was a success in the result of a healthy, translocated weanling, the site management created a great deal of dissatisfaction from volunteers and the community at large. With the birth occurring on a tombola between two crescents of beach, volunteers and local officials immediately established a temporary perimeter. The Pacific Islands Area Office (PIAO) sent four biologist-monitors, none with relevant monk seal field experience, to Kaua'i.

During the second week, when the mother and pup spent extended periods of time on the Po'ipu side of the beach area, experienced volunteers recommended a shift of perimeters to close the Po'ipu side of the beach and leave the other side (Wa'i'ohai) open to the public. These local suggestions were repeatedly disregarded, and initial perimeters remained at the direction of the PIAO office in Honolulu. Locally, these perimeters were deemed ineffective, since they allowed human activity too close to both sides of the mother and pup, when they began to range greater distances. Unfortunately, when the mother seal nipped a snorkeler near the perimeter rope, a closure of both sides of the beach became inevitable.

The failure to acknowledge volunteer experience, and local input, and the resultant double beach closure brought a great deal of discord to the community. Volunteers felt underutilized, and many drifted from the program. They sensed the site was remote-controlled from Honolulu and failed to comprehend the federal government's spending money to fly in and house four monitors without HMS experience. KMSWP has considerably fewer volunteers now as a result.

Anger within the community at large was evidenced by letters to the editor (*Garden Island*), and vocal complaints from local businesses, lifeguards, and activists. Some rather wild rumors and misinformation were frequently heard, and a significant disruption of the previously thriving seal watch-community integration was inevitable.

(b) Management - Future

KMSWP members unquestionably want to see consistent, workable protocols for our public beach births. With paramount consideration to HMS welfare, we need to always strongly consider the needs of local citizens and our visitor industry. Meetings held earlier this year with all local, state, and federal interests were a healthy start in the right direction.

Local on-site decision-making, within the parameters of state and federal endangered species law, is a key issue. We know and appreciate that significant time, effort, and federal dollars are spent studying HMS in the Northwest Hawaiian Islands. We also feel that Kaua'i, as the main Hawaiian Island with the largest HMS population, deserves at least one biologist/researcher stationed here. The opportunity to study the human/seal interaction, while overseeing volunteer and community efforts, is unique.

To that end, we are gratified by the recent decision to place a monk seal specialist on Kaua'i on a three-month temporary contract. We strongly urge the members of the Marine Mammal Commission to recommend that the position be funded permanently.